

The President's Daily Brief

March 18, 1975

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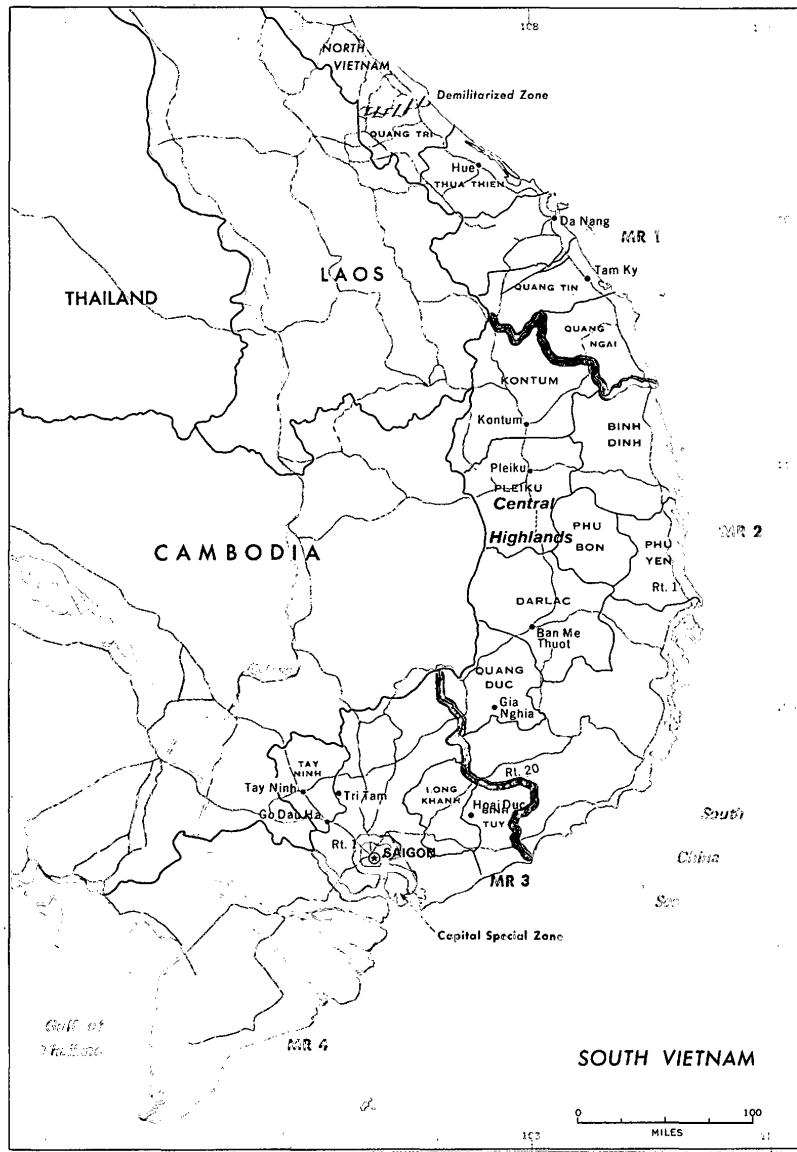
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SOUTH VIETNAM

Communist forces are making a substantial impact in the early stages of their offensive as the government makes major defensive redeployments.

The last South Vietnamese Marine brigade has withdrawn from Quang Tri Province. As of late yesterday, most of the government administrative apparatus had departed and the bulk of the population is fleeing to the relative safety of Hue and Da Nang.

Small actions flared around Hue, but the most significant fighting in the Military Region 1 occurred in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces. Communist forces kept pressure on government forces just west of Tam Ky, overrunning several key outposts. In Quang Ngai Province, they blocked Route 1, cutting the province off from Da Nang, and they also seized a number of government outposts near the capitals of those western districts that the government is preparing to abandon.

The situation in the western highlands is deteriorating rapidly. Only one ranger unit has been left to help the territorial forces fight a holding action at Kontum. The military units in Pleiku have either been evacuated or left to fend for themselves, and the Pleiku airfield was closed late yesterday. The South Vietnamese 23rd Division, ordered to recapture Ban Me Thuot, is being pushed eastward into the mountains. The road to the coast is still blocked and attempts are under way to rescue some of the 23rd's remnants by helicopter. In Quang Duc Province, government units are under attack in each district, and the provincial capital, Gia Nghia, may soon come under strong pressure.

Along the central coast, elements of the North Vietnamese 3rd Division are attacking the South Vietnamese 22nd Division in Binh Dinh Province. Route 1 was cut briefly in Phu Yen Province, and both major roads between the coast and the highlands remain blocked by communist forces.

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Closer to Saigon, the communists have attacked a 20-mile stretch of Route 20 in Long Khanh Province, effectively cutting the last road link between the capital and the highlands. Tank-led attacks reportedly overran a district capital in Long Khanh. The district town of Hoai Duc in neighboring Binh Tuy has also come under new attacks.

An important South Vietnamese outpost less than five miles east of Tay Ninh City was lost yesterday as communist units, probably from the 9th Division, moved west from Tri Tam district town, which they took earlier. Freshly reinforced government troops are attempting to push the communists back west of Go Dau Ha, but have encouraged stiff resistance.

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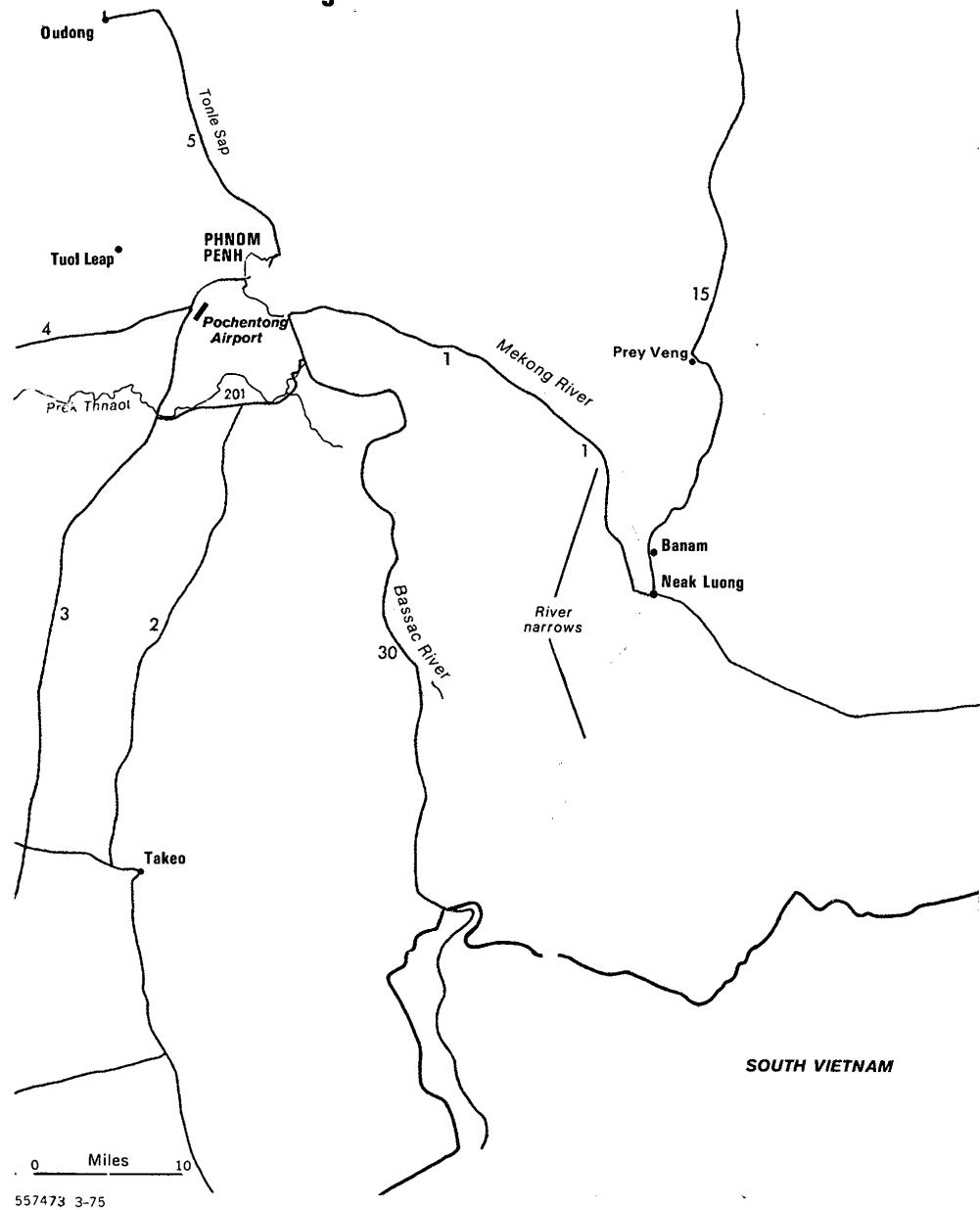
Large numbers of refugees have begun moving from areas abandoned by South Vietnamese military forces in the northern provinces and central highlands. In Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, people are moving toward Hue, but will probably eventually move on to Da Nang when they discover the limited defense the government plans for the former imperial capital.

In Southern Military Region 1, many people have begun to move toward the coast; they too will probably try to find safety near Da Nang.

In the central highlands, large numbers of people have begun moving out of Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon, Quang Duc, and Darlac provinces. It is likely, however, that the communists will try to stop the mass exodus of civilians, although no attempts have yet been made.

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Cambodia: Lower Mekong



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CAMBODIA

In the past week, representatives from the Malaysian, Indonesian, and Philippine embassies have called on Ambassador Dean to stress their belief that President Lon Nol must step aside if there is to be any chance for a peaceful settlement of the Cambodian conflict.

Cambodian government forces, according to preliminary reports, last night evacuated the navy base at Neak Luong, but still hold the town.

The diplomats, as well as others from the embassies of Singapore, Thailand, and Japan, have expressed similar views in private meetings with Prime Minister Long Boret. The Malaysian chargé told Dean that his actions and those of his colleagues were self-initiated and were not the result of formal instructions from their respective governments.

Dean reported yesterday that such pressures are finding their mark. Despite the Khmer communists' continued hard line toward any compromises whatsoever, increasing numbers of influential and knowledgeable Cambodians are openly criticizing Lon Nol for his alleged inflexibility toward negotiations and are expressing the hope that he will voluntarily step aside to open the way for a peaceful settlement. Moreover, many of these Cambodians are apparently following the US Congressional debate on supplemental aid for Cambodia and have received the impression that US legislators would be more willing to vote additional aid if Lon Nol were to step down.

Prime Minister Long Boret, for his part, reportedly has been meeting with a number of civilian and military leaders to discuss ways of persuading Lon Nol to retire. This group has apparently not decided on a course of action other than to invite Lon Non, President Lon Nol's younger brother, to their meetings. The group expects Lon Non to inform the president of the growing sentiment for his departure and hopes that Lon Nol will voluntarily step down.

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There is no evidence of any organized plan to remove Lon Nol forcibly. Long Boret, in fact, specifically discounted the threat of a coup by younger officers, citing the combination of US disapproval and the possibility of resistance from loyal units as sufficient deterrents. The growing Asian dis-enchantment with Lon Nol, however, is sure to embolden Lon Nol's critics.

* * *

The navy base at Neak Luong had been the target of steady shelling for several days and reportedly was burning when abandoned. The base was on an island just off the town of Neak Luong; personnel and vessels from the base have joined government defenders in Neak Luong, which is being hit by heavy communist shelling. The government had halted supply operations to Neak Luong and the nearby town of Banam, following the loss of three navy vessels in a convoy bound for Neak Luong over the weekend.

Khmer communist units in the Phnom Penh area are continuing to launch intermittent rocket attacks against Pochehtong airport, but no artillery fire has hit near the airfield since government forces reoccupied the town of Tuol Leap on Saturday. The Cambodian army task force at Tuol Leap is scheduled to begin moving today against suspected rocket positions just northeast of the town. Light and inconclusive fighting continues on other battlefronts around the capital.

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PLO-SYRIA

The executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization has "wholeheartedly welcomed" Syrian President Asad's offer on March 8 to establish joint Syrian-Palestinian political and military commands.

Asad's proposal stemmed primarily from his fear that Egyptian President Sadat is preparing to conclude an agreement with Israel that will not include guarantees of further progress on the Golan front. Asad is also concerned that Sadat, in seeking a comprehensive settlement, might commit Egypt to renounce its military option. The Syrian president sought by his offer to underscore his country's commitment to the Palestinian cause and, by implication, to cast doubt on Egypt's.

Damascus apparently has no concrete idea of the form a cooperative arrangement with the PLO should take. Asad told his audience that he was simply indicating the lengths to which Syria would go in defending the Palestinians.

The warm reaction given the Syrian proposal by PLO leaders reflects a lack of viable options more than genuine enthusiasm for closer association with Damascus. At a time when PLO-Egyptian relations are strained, Arafat cannot afford to offend the Syrians.

Fedayeen leaders are always suspicious of Syrian motives, and are likely to drag out--perhaps indefinitely--preparations for implementing the Syrian proposals. Palestinian broadcasts have said that the PLO's central committee will meet this week to discuss the offer prior to entering into "detailed discussions" with the Syrians. Any understanding finally reached with Damascus would probably be referred to the Palestinian parliament, the Palestine National Council, which would have to be convoked for the purpose.

The chief danger in the Syrian proposal, in Palestinian eyes, is that it could pave the way for an attempt by Damascus to seize control of the PLO. Arafat and his associates also worry that any closer association with the Damascus government would deny them the policy leeway they now enjoy, and could result in Syrian army control of fedayeen operations outside Syria.

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Despite these reservations, the PLO will want to keep the prospect of association with Syria alive. To the relatively moderate leaders of the PLO, including Arafat, even a fictional Palestinian-Syrian alliance would strengthen the Palestinians' bargaining position with Egypt, Israel, and the US. It would also enable them to better endure any showdown with the more radical Palestinian "rejectionist" groups, many of whose members are already being detained by the Syrians.

To Arafat, Asad's proposal probably seems one way of getting around Israel's refusal to negotiate with the PLO by including PLO representatives in a Syrian delegation to the Geneva talks when they resume. Asad acknowledged publicly on March 9 that his offer might provide such an opportunity, although he pointed out that such an association could just as easily keep Syria away from Geneva.

Asad may also hope that the joint command concept will provide a framework for resolving the dispute between the PLO and Jordan, and eventually bring Amman into closer military arrangements with Syria. The Jordanians remain suspicious of both the Palestinians and the Syrians, however, and have so far indicated no interest in such a scheme or in becoming more actively involved in general peace negotiations.

Israeli officials have publicly expressed "grave concern" that the Syrian proposal will "not add to the success" of Secretary Kissinger's current mission. The Israeli press has flatly labeled Asad's move an effort to foil the political talks.

In Egypt, there has been no official comment on the Syrian proposal. In an effort not to be outdone, however, the government has put out the word through unnamed "responsible sources" that Egypt would have no objection to participating in a unified Arab delegation at the Geneva conference. This Egyptian proposal was clearly made without enthusiasm. Cairo's primary concern at this time is to counter Arab charges that Egypt is negotiating unilaterally.

US officials in Beirut have observed an intensification of contact between Soviet and PLO officials that may be related to the Syrian proposal. Neither side has given any clear indication that the consultations concern the "joint-command" concept, but several knowledgeable observers have told US officials that the subject has been discussed extensively and that the Soviets are favorable to the idea.

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EGYPT-SYRIA

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Such exercises in Egypt are often followed in a few days by large-scale operational exercises involving mobilization. This occurred last summer and just prior to the 1973 war. The exercises may be the final steps in the implementation of President Sadat's order to the Egyptian armed forces to be ready for action by the end of March.

The Syrian alert may be related to Cairo's measures. Training by Syrian air and ground force units has been at a high level since the beginning of the year.

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Tel Aviv, meanwhile, has publicly noted that Cairo and Damascus may be preparing for some limited military activity to get the political negotiations moving.

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FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY**NOTES**

The resumption of the intercommunal negotiations on a Cyprus settlement may be delayed following disagreement between Greek and Turkish Cypriots over the venue and the composition of the delegations.

The Greek Cypriots prefer to hold the talks in New York, where they believe it will be easier for UN Secretary General Waldheim to play a substantial role. The Turkish Cypriots oppose any major role for Waldheim and fear that talks in New York would be subjected to pro-Greek pressures. The Turkish Cypriot plan to replace Rauf Denktash as their negotiator will further complicate efforts to get the talks started. This move is apparently designed to support Denktash's contention that as president of the newly proclaimed "Federated Turkish State of Cyprus" he is an equal to President Makarios and can no longer negotiate with Glafkos Clerides.

* * *

Discontent with Bangladesh President Mujibur Rahman's rule is resurfacing, despite his attempts to generate popular support for his new authoritarian presidential system.

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Military officers displeased with Mujib have been plotting almost continuously for about a year. Current plotting seems to have been motivated by concern that Mujib soon may try to tighten his personal control of the armed forces.

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The French again have offered to lower the Mirage price in a bid to win the fighter competition with the US.

The Mirage F-1E now costs about \$5.2 million; with the reported reductions the cost would drop to about \$4.6 million. This figure would compare favorably with the most austere version of the F-16, which would cost \$4.5 million.

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[redacted] there is still a good chance that the entire four-nation consortium will purchase the US-built F-16 if the Dutch resist the Belgian defense minister's urging.

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